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THE OCCURRENCE OF PRETEND PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ROMANIA - AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

At preschool age, it is generally accepted that children's main pursuit is play. Children have the ability to be creative during play, because they are original, unique and fabulous. In particular, pretend play has a major role in supporting a preschooler's learning process. Early pretend play involves object substitution, before later progressing to the incorporation of invisible objects. The purpose of the presented study was to validate that pretend play contributes significantly to children's emotional, social, physical and intellectual development and can achieve the skills promoted by *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* in Romania. A questionnaire-based survey was undertaken, consisting of factual items (age, grade teacher), closed questions with pre-coded answers that were easily quantifiable and open questions that required analysis. The questionnaire was administered to a non-probabilistic sample, consisting of 80 kindergarten educators which were arbitrarily selected from nine kindergartens. The findings support the hypothesis of the advantages of pretend play in relation to *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* in Romania.

Keywords: creativity, pretend play, field development, preschool, early childhood education

Introduction

Play is widely identified and recognised as an important part of children's early lives, particularly within the preschool environment. Internationally, play is an embedded part of many early years curriculums, but play is also something that can be variably interpreted and enacted. Here we focus on creative pretend play and its role in supporting the holistic development of children, drawing on the example of Romania. In order to explore the role of creativity, as it manifests itself in the preschool environment, and its role for reaching the demands of *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* (Curriculum pentru învățământul preșcolar ***) framework in Romania preschool education, we analyse creativity at both the theoretical and practical level. We present empirical research that was designed to explore how creative pretend play contributes significantly to children's emotional, social, physical and intellectual development. We propose that creative pretend play supports and achieves the competences outlined by *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* in Romania, but that the findings are significant for early education curricula worldwide. At a time when preschool education internationally faces increasing pressures to demonstrate its effectiveness in contributing to children's development (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016), we present an argument to reinforce the historic focus on play in early years education.

Early Childhood Education in Romania

Romania's modern early education system can be traced to an important transformation concerning the curriculum that took place in 2008 when the entire learning process was focused on the child's interests and specific educational needs. From that year, Early Childhood Education represented a component of the national education system. According to the national legal framework in the field of education (Law no. 1/2011) Early Education (0–6 years) covers the early preschool education level (3months to 3years) and preschool education level (3–6 years). The move towards early education reflects similar developments in many other European countries to legally position the early years as a stage of the education system, with a specific curriculum. Whilst we recognise the birth to six age as holistically important, and recognise that the split model in Romania is potentially problematic due to neglecting the birth to three age group and potentially creating additional transitions for children (see Campbell-Barr, 2019), it is the preschool stage that is the focus of our discussion.

In Romanian preschools, children from 3 to 6 years old are organized by age level: 1st level-3 to 5 years old and 2nd level- 5 to 6 years old, and then divided into age groups, little group, medium group and big group. The foundations of the early education model are to ensure free, integral and harmonious

intellectual, emotional, social and psychical development of the child's personality, according to his rhythm and needs, whilst targeting to achieve the following goals:

- *The free, integral and harmonious development of the child's personality;*
- *Development of the capacity to interact with others in order to acquire new knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours,*
- *The discovery, by each child, of his/her own identity and autonomy and the development of a positive self-image;*
- *Supporting the child in the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes required for his school entry and throughout life.*

(Eurydice, 2019a: online source)

The SEEPRO-R (Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe) study, which analysed early education models and staffing requirements presents the Romanian system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as multi-sectorial.

Whereas kindergartens for 3- to 6-/7-year olds come under the remit of the Ministry of National Education (Ministerul Educației Naționale - MEN) and are part of the 'preuniversity' education system, nurseries/crèches and infant-toddler centres for children up to age 3 belong both to the national system of social services and to the education system and come under the shared responsibility of three different ministries: the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice (Ministerul Muncii și Justiției Sociale), the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Public Health (Ministerul Sănătății).

(Ciolan et al., 2018 p. 932)

In other contexts, the Romanian early years system has been described as split due to the divide between children's earliest years and those described as 'preschool'. The split model has more generally been criticised for creating multiple transitions for children and disjointed policy initiatives (Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013). The split model also means different staffing requirements between the two elements of the early years system, potentially creating inequality in the experiences of children (Campbell-Barr, 2019). Whilst many other countries have moved towards a more integrated model, with comprehensive services for children from birth to school age, the current Romanian model is set against a context of a period of continuous change in education policy for the last 15 years (Péter, 2008).

In preschool education in Romania, the professional profiles of staff include 'educators' (educatoare) who have completed a specialist qualification at a Pedagogical High School (upper secondary

vocational), 'Elementary Teachers' (institutori) who completed a short-term higher education degree (three years) awarded by the University College of Elementary Teachers. From 2005 this qualification has been replaced by 'Primary and Pre-primary Teachers' (profesori pentru învățământul primar și preșcolar) with a higher education degree and a dual specialism (Ciolan et al., 2018 p. 933-934). The move towards combining primary and pre-primary specialism has been criticised within the French system amidst fears that is the primary stage that forms the focus of the degree (Garnier, 2011). With the focus on primary, there is a risk that more formal, as opposed to play-based, pedagogical approaches are taught to students.

In Pre-university education (preschool, primary school, secondary school and high-school), the initial training provided within formal education is completed with an insertion period of one year. During the insertion period debutant teachers have to teach and at the same time prepare for the exam that gives them the possibility to become fully-fledged teachers. The professional-degrees that can be obtained after this period are, in this order: the second didactic degree and the first didactic degree. Professional-degrees are rewarded with higher salaries for the same teaching position and with opportunities to access different guiding and control positions (Eurydice, 2019b).

Once qualified, the preschool teacher has autonomy in planning and developing the activities that will take place in the learning environment, using his/her creativity and professional efficiency, so long as *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* is adhered to. Through the different activities they 'teach' different subjects using interdisciplinary learning: Language Development, Math and Science, Arts, Music, Physical Education during what is referred to as 'the morning schedule' (from 8 to 12) and during the afternoon activities. In the morning, children are involved in free choice activities based upon centres of activity (Arts, Science, Role Play, Blocks, Library, Sand and Water and Board Games), experiential domain activities and personal development activities.

The goals of *The Curriculum for Preschool Education* (that we have mentioned before) are achieved through the framework and the referenced objectives specific to all experiential areas. However, some areas of the curriculum include specific reference to creativity. In particular, the aesthetic and creative experience field covers the abilities to respond emotionally and intellectually to perceptual experiences, sensitivity to different levels of quality manifestation, appreciating beauty by stimulating expressiveness and creativity through drawing, painting and modelling. Among the specific objectives of the experiential language and communication field, we also identify an objective that aims at developing the creativity and expressivity of oral language. However, despite the focus on creativity in the curriculum, the learning environment is at risk of becoming a more formal one.

With the stress on high student performance, meeting the standards of the education field and maintaining accountability have led curriculum to be mainly focused on content, taking focus away from the developmental needs of children (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, and Rogers, 2010). Kindergarten has become a structured environment with requirements to prepare children for standardized testing in kindergarten and the future (Ray and Smith, 2010)

(Thelen, 2012, p.2)

The challenge to the pedagogical focus of the early years learning environment is not unique to Romania. For example, debates on 'school readiness' in many other countries illustrate the increased pressure of accountability, whereby early years education becomes a preparation for later stages of education (see Moss, 2017). In England (for example), the focus on accountability is perceived to result in negative consequences for the shaping of the preschool learning environment, whereby there is an emphasis on formal learning and a neglect of play-based approaches (see Bradbury, 2014). Whilst play-based pedagogies remain deeply engrained in the philosophy (and history) of early education, our focus on creativity offers a renewed evidence base for the importance of play in the early years.

Theoretical Framework

For a correct identification of the incidence of creativity in educational activities specific to preschool education, we propose to delimit the term 'creativity', whose etymological perspective derives from the Latin *creare*, which means to give birth, to conceive, to create or to build. Introduced by Allport in 1937 (Allport, 1991), the term creativity, designates the ability to produce the new; the general disposition of personality towards the new. Popescu-Neveanu (1973) attributes creativity to the state of latency without acting momentarily in action. Zlate (2000) considers creativity as the transformative side of personality, becoming one of the most complex dimensions of personality, and shows that in creativity are not only psychological factors, but also socio-cultural, psychosocial and socio-educational factors that integrate the entire personality and mental activity of the individual. In laymen terms creativity implies original ideas and innovation.

Creativity research started during the early 1950's. In contrast to earlier studies focussing on the internal determinants of creativity, there was an increase in interest regarding the creative capacity within a social context during the 1980's and 1990's (Ryhammar and Brolin, 1999; Naudé, 2005, p. 12). The sociocultural approach to creativity was sustained by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988):

Csikszentmihalyi has developed a comprehensive system view of the creativity that involves three forces: society, culture and the individual. He believes that it is impossible to study creativity if we isolate the individuals by their sociocultural context.

(McCharty, 1997, p.10).

From a different perspective, creativity represents the superior level of thinking and is above all a process leading to a particular product. The main psychological factor of creativity seems to be flexibility, which means the rapid change of thinking when the situation demands it, the easy restructuring of old cortical links in accordance with the requirements of the new situation and the easy realization of the transfer in solving problems (Roşca, 1967). Seen as a psychic activity, creativity is also found at the preschool age, manifested at the primary psychic level; that is the expressive creativity embodied in creative imagination, elements of construction, originality, evolution, inner freedom, staged by drawing activities, practical activities and / or modelled through pretend play.

The Curriculum for Preschool Education (Curriculum pentru învăţământul preşcolar ***) in Romania emphasizes the importance of child development in the context of today's society, in which the child's education for school and for life should take into account not only academic competences but also his/her capacities, skills and attitudes related to social and emotional development (living and working together or with others, managing emotions, accepting diversity, tolerance, etc.), cognitive development (addressing problematic situations, divergent thinking, establishing causal relationships, associations, correlations, etc.) and physical development (motricity, health, healthy eating, etc.). The Romanian curriculum is thus not that different to many other international early education curriculums in emphasising the holistic development of the child. However, the field of learning capacities and attitudes within the curriculum also comprises the dimension of *creativity*. From the perspective of *The Curriculum for Preschool Education*, the emphasis on creativity aims to develop the child's ability to use the information and skills acquired in new strategies and contexts (thus relating to our earlier definition), to expand their own learning using imagination beyond the conventional patterns of thinking and current situations and to express their ideas, opinions and emotions in new forms. However, a question remains as to what the dimension of creativity may constitute within the early years learning environment.

Pretend play

The role and importance of pretend play in children's intellectual, social and emotional development is well supported by decades of research. Further, researchers and theorists in this field reached the

conclusion that there is an important connection between creativity and pretend play. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identified a creative state which he termed “flow”. He defines it as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.4). Thus the creative sensory experience is transformed into thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Creativity in pretend play involves fantasy, make-believe, and the use of one object “as if” it were another object (Fein, 1987; Russ, 2004). It is most prominent during the preschool years and is associated with positive developmental tasks such as creativity, problem solving, coping, emotion regulation, and general adjustment (Russ, 2000). Pretend play relates to creativity in a large number of studies and has facilitated creativity in some studies (Dansky, 1999; Russ and Wallace, 2013). In 2016, in their work *From play to practice*, Nell et al. (2016, p.77) assert that children imagine, interpret and make predictions, expressing their thoughts through words and images, and perhaps even through actions that go beyond the experience in playing. The creativity generated thus enhances their ability to think, feel, and engage in more complex communication with others.

Pretend play is influenced by the child’s life experiences in the family environment and by their social impressions. Interaction between these influences creates original products, unique to the pre-school age child, favouring the reconfiguration in a specific way of reality or imagination. So, as children engage in play, they generate new ideas or stories or they transform objects according to their interests.

In his work *Child and Play*, Jean Chateau (1967) believes that pretend play is influenced by the child's geographical environment, whereby the children from the mountains create different forms and types of play than those from the countryside, just as the city children are differentiated at the level of creation, from the rural ones. Pretend play can be used in the following situations: manipulations of objects and/or toys, storytelling, creation of mental images, exploring imaginary places, expressing different emotions for real or imaginative situations. It involves symbolic behaviour whereby “one thing is playfully treated as if it were someone else” (Fein, 1987, p. 282), in this way this type of play becomes a child’s creative product. The cited author also regards play as the child’s natural form of creativity. Pretend play makes a significant contribution to the development of all personality components, and in such play children have the freedom to develop an absolutely new construction, to rebuild a previously presented model based on imagination and fantasy, by playfully imitating socio-professional roles.

Throughout their studies, researchers who have focused on the relationship between creativity and pretend play at different ages for 4-10 years old (Kaugars and Russ, 2009, Hoffman and Russ 2012) have concluded that there is a good connection between the two. For example, Dansky and Silverman (1973)

discovered that children who were involved in pretend play in different situations were capable of finding more uses for the object they used during play. Russ (2003) identifies pretend play as very important in the development of cognitive and affective processes that determine the creative act.

Methodology and sample

As a logical consequence of the theoretical approach outlined above, the aim of the research study, along with the persuasive character it entails, is to draw attention to the necessity and opportunity of developing pretend play, applicable to different categories of activities, either during the morning schedule or in the afternoon activities in the preschool environment in Romania. The hypothesis that we intend to test, is based on the premise that pretend play influences the overall development of the child, contributing significantly to the achievement of the specific objectives of the experiential domains in the context of formal and non-formal education.

From a methodological point of view, we used the survey method, based on a questionnaire, in which, we introduced closed questions with a panel of pre-coded answers and open questions requiring answers, in addition to the factual items. Questions pertaining to pretend play included:

- What are the most important advantages of using pretend play in the activities specific to preschool education?
- When do you use pretend play in the daily schedule?
- Which are the factors that influence the use of pretend play in kindergarten activities?
- What are the limits on the implementation of pretend play?

Whilst there are inevitable limits to the depth of the responses that the free text questions could generate they offered participants the opportunity to express their views in their own words, with the responses being cross analysed against the pre-coded questions.

The questionnaire was administered to a non-probability sample of 80 preschool teachers, arbitrarily selected from 9 kindergartens. The staff were spread over the following age categories: 9 under 25, 45 between 25-40 years, 22 between 40-55 years and 4 over 55 years. The dispersion according to their professional experience, corroborated with when they obtained their degree and highlights the following configuration: 5 debutants, 22 with the definitive degree, 22 with the second didactic degree and 31 with the first didactic degree. Given the sample size, the respondents cannot be considered representative of preschool teachers in Romania, but could be described as indicative.

The survey adhered to the general principles of undertaking research ethically, thus ensuring that participants were aware of the focus of the research and the intended use of the data, whilst also maintaining their anonymity. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey participants were not able to extract their data once it was submitted.

Findings

We surveyed the respondents' perception of the most important advantages that pretend play has on the development of the child using an open-ended question. The responses were coded to look for similarities in the responses given. Seventy-five percent of the teachers mentioned the development of creativity, thinking and imagination (although not necessarily all items were within a single response), and 25 percent added socio-emotional development in addition to developing creativity.

Using another pre-coded question, we tested the frequency with which teachers use pretend play during the weekly program. We suggested in the question the activities of role-play and dramatic play and the use of blocks, which are typically used in free choice activities in Romania. The duration that the activities lasted is according to age of the child (3 years old-15 minutes, 4 years old- 20 minutes, 5/6 years old- 25, 30 minutes). Thus, 56 of the respondents (70%) use pretend play twice a week, 17 of them (21%) use the pretend play daily, 5 of them (6 %) once a week, and 2 (3,%) preschool teachers occasionally use this type of play. As a self-reported item, there is the potential that teachers may present an ideal response – either that of their own or what they think we, as researchers, are looking for, but in our opinion the responses indicate that preschool teachers allow far too little time for pretend play in the daily schedule even though they admit to the importance of this type of play for developing creativity (as mentioned in the previous item). Given the evidence presented earlier it is our opinion that it would be desirable if preschool teachers would allow children to use pretend play in the free choice activities every day, in experiential activities and even in the free play period (before the beginning of the daily activities). During these activities, children can express their creativity, encourage concentration, and develop fine motor skills. At the same time, pretend play allows children to feel proud of their creations and gain a sense of mastery after they have created something.

Through an open-ended question, we asked respondents to list the factors that they believe favour and influence the use of pretend play. In the order of frequency they are:

- The teaching materials at hand (100% of respondents);
- Establishing tasks and rules by means of clarity and consistent guidelines / recommendations;
- The age and life experience of children;

- The personality and creativity of the educator.

It is interesting to see that the teachers identified with the use of materials first, as research into the quality of early education and professional roles in England has indicated that structural features are 'easier' to manipulate when seeking to make changes to a learning environment (Mathers et al., 2011). Conversely, items relating to more sustained changes to the culture of the early years environment are harder to change. Further, there is increasing evidence of the influence of the personality of the teacher on the learning environment, both in relation to their motivations for entering the profession and their concepts of childhood and learning (Campbell-Barr, 2019). The items identified by the teachers therefore appear to reflect wider 'challenges' to changing pedagogical practice, with the most common factor – materials – potentially being the easiest to overcome, whilst a change in the personality of the educator is harder to achieve.

The personality of the educator is particularly important because, according to Ryhammar and Brolin (1999), creative individuals can be described as motivated, persevering, intellectually inquisitive, having a need for self-actualisation, independent in thought and deed, confident, self-aware, and open to external and internal stimulation. In our opinion, all these particularities can be transferred to a teacher's personality, which is why creative teachers are able to perform teaching and learning processes effectively by combining various contextual instructional materials, instructional strategies, instructional media and real-life experiences. Thus, whilst the items in the questionnaire are presented as separate, there is a clear relationship between them, whereby it is about both the materials and the educator's personality (for example). Therefore, the apparent 'ease' with which structural features can be changed will be dependent on the personality of the teacher, although we would argue that there is a clear need to explore this relationship in more depth, particularly given the potential advantages for children's learning.

Richard (2002) and Moore (2005) argue that the ability of a teacher to prepare such teaching models has a positive effect on learner motivation because real needs and interest of learners are fulfilled and the learners themselves are engaged in the teaching learning process.

(Manurung, 2012, p. 2)

In comparison, when the teacher is "authoritarian, rigid, dominated by time, insensitive to pupils' emotional needs, unwilling to give of themselves, preoccupied with discipline and the giving of information" learners will become non-creative (Wallace, 1986, p.72).

Starting from the premise that the creative potential does not develop from inaction, but as a result of concerted, coordinated and guided actions by the teachers, we asked the participants in our

investigation to enumerate the possible limits on the implementation of pretend play. We found out that the respondents identified limits on the use of the pretend play such as:

- The lack of involvement in play by shy children and their anonymity;
- A difficult set-up for the play leader with the occurrence of conflicts involving competition;
- A transposition of undesirable behaviours into reality;
- Lack of time for using pretend play as much as children would like.

Thus, whilst we have emphasised the role of the teacher in the promotion of creativity and pretend play, we acknowledge that working in early education involves a pedagogical relationship with the child, whereby the educator will be interacting with the child's needs, abilities and personality traits. Thus, both the personality of the teacher and the child will influence pretend play in the early education environment. Further, the potential for conflict (the second item in the list) illustrates that the teacher is managing the needs, abilities and personality traits of a group of children. The personality of the teacher therefore meets with the personalities of the children in their class, suggesting that the intentions of the teacher may not be met with the outcomes that they desired, anticipated and/or expected. There is a long history in exploring the pedagogic relationship between teachers and children and identifying the careful and consider responses of educators. For example, recent European research has demonstrated not only children's different forms of play in the early years environment, but also the variable ways in which educators engage in the play, including motivating the imaginations and creativity of the children they work with (Campbell-Barr et al, 2018). Importantly, the research draws attention to a distinction between child- and children- centred to illustrate that the pedagogic relationship is multiple and varied. However, less is known as to what the pedagogic relationship might constitute when seeking to specifically promote creativity.

Discussion

We recognise that the research presented is limited by the number of respondents and that those who did respond, even though well intentioned, may have provided illusory or inadequate information in relation to the investigation. However, the findings indicate that the factors that influence pretend play and creativity in the early years learning environment are identified to be both in relation to the adult and the child. For the adult, materials, rules and personality all appear as factors, whilst for the child it is their experiences, shyness/confidence and the potential for conflicts. We recognise that a further limitation to the study is that the findings are based upon the views of adults and a particular group of adults. As such, it may be that parents cite different factors (all-be-it premised on different

interpretations of the needs and abilities of the children) to those that have been identified by teachers. Importantly, we do not know the perspective of the children and whether they would identify with the same challenges. What does appear to be apparent within the findings is that the personalities of both teachers and children will influence pretend play and this warrants further exploration in future research.

We recognise that pretend play by itself may not be the sole factor for creativity and that it is not necessarily a strong context for (what policy officials may regard as) academic achievement. Innate ability, culture, family and school background and other environmental factors are all implicated in creativity development in children (Runco, 2006). Thus the identification of the child's personality as a factor for influencing pretend play is one that extends to recognising their socio-cultural environment. In particular, we need to acknowledge that pretend play and creativity may not always be identified as important within the communities that children come from. For example, some parents may prioritise forms of capital that focus on academic achievement, rendering creative pursuits as offering little contribution to academic success. Further, there is the potential for mismatches between the expectations of teachers in what pretend play might look like and those of the children and the families that they come from.

Conclusions

Our starting point for the research was always the hypothesis that pretend play offered the potential to meet the demands of the Romanian early years curriculum. Whilst we recognise our bias in advocating pretend play, given the global pressures identified earlier for early years educators to 'ready' children for school, potentially at the expense of allowing them time to play, we feel it is important to explore the contributions that pretend play can have for meeting the demands of (arguably) prescriptive early years curriculums.

Starting from the premise that the purpose of a survey based on a questionnaire is not only explorative but also ameliorative, we believe that the results we have can be transposed onto the practical plan in Romania, and we believe that further investigations can be developed that allow for the detachment of some deeper links of the factors and variables involved in our study. Taking into consideration the responses from the questionnaire (and the discussions we have had with preschool teachers) we suggest there should be a reconsideration of the importance of pretend play in developing creativity. The daily programme in the Romanian kindergarten promotes different types of learning activities in a fixed period of time, according to teaching plan and the educational aims promoted by *The Curriculum*

for Preschool Education (2008). The pressures of the curriculum, alongside the expectation for outcomes, is one of the reasons why teachers have less time for using pretend play (together with focusing on academic skills and preparation for school). In regard to further investigations that we would like to develop, it would be interesting to study the impact that the daily use of pretend play in Romanian kindergartens has on developing a child's creativity. In order to do that, we aim to investigate a large number of teachers and pre-schoolers using an educational program that includes a series of initial and final tests and rigorous instruments for observation.

It is certain that within pretend play the preschool compensates through conscious and / or unconscious symbolism, some tendencies and desires that the child cannot practically satisfy. Therefore, Eugenia Popescu (1993) states that pretend play is in fact a symbolic play because the child renders by gestures and words, with the help of toys or objects, aspects of reality according to the representations at his disposal. The findings indicate that the teacher should focus on creating a well-organized, secure and at the same time non-rigid environment that encourages pre-schoolers to imagine, explore, take initiative, awaken curiosity, stimulate cooperation, create and recreate the fantastic.

The relationship between pretend play and creativity during the preschool age range should continue to be examined as these are both important abilities to foster in childhood and improvements during this unique stage of development could have long-lasting positive effects on the child's general development. Teachers need to model and encourage creativity; they must show children that they value and enjoy new and original things and that they appreciate creative people. Teachers must remember the importance of creativity and playfulness when they are making choices for the classroom. Nevertheless, play is important as a precursor for the development of potential creativity (Johnson, 2007).

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